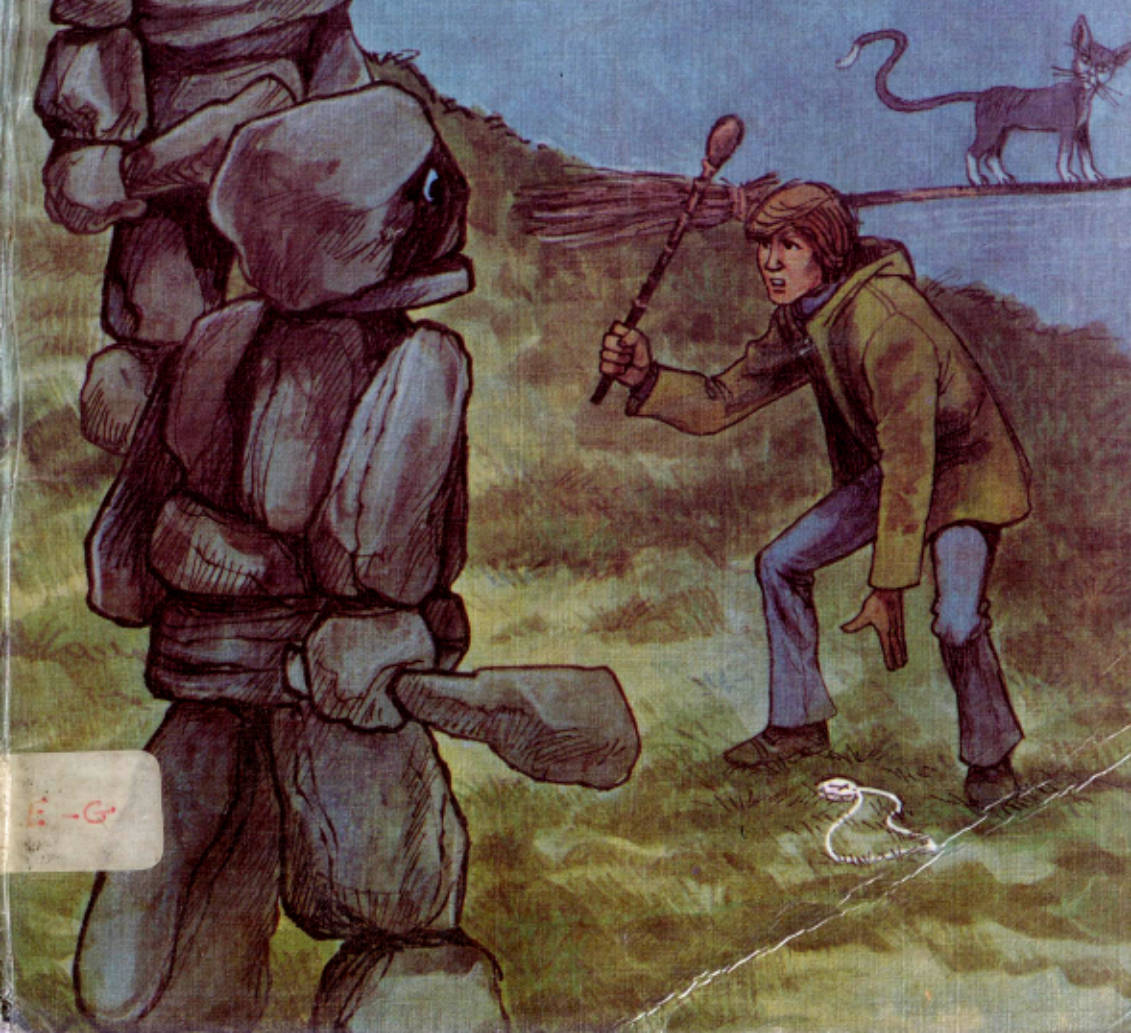


Tim and the Hidden People

At the Hill of the Stone Prisons

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Ray Mutimer



At the Hill of the Stone Prisons



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ARNOLD-WHEATON



The broomstick swept on, across the snow.

Tim and Morag looked up at the sky. The clouds had gone, and the sky in the east was growing light.

Sebastian stood on the end of the broomstick, twitching his tail. He was flying only a metre or two above the ground. If any eyes were watching, Sebastian didn't want them to see the broomstick. Tim and Morag, wrapped in their white blanket, were almost invisible against the snow.

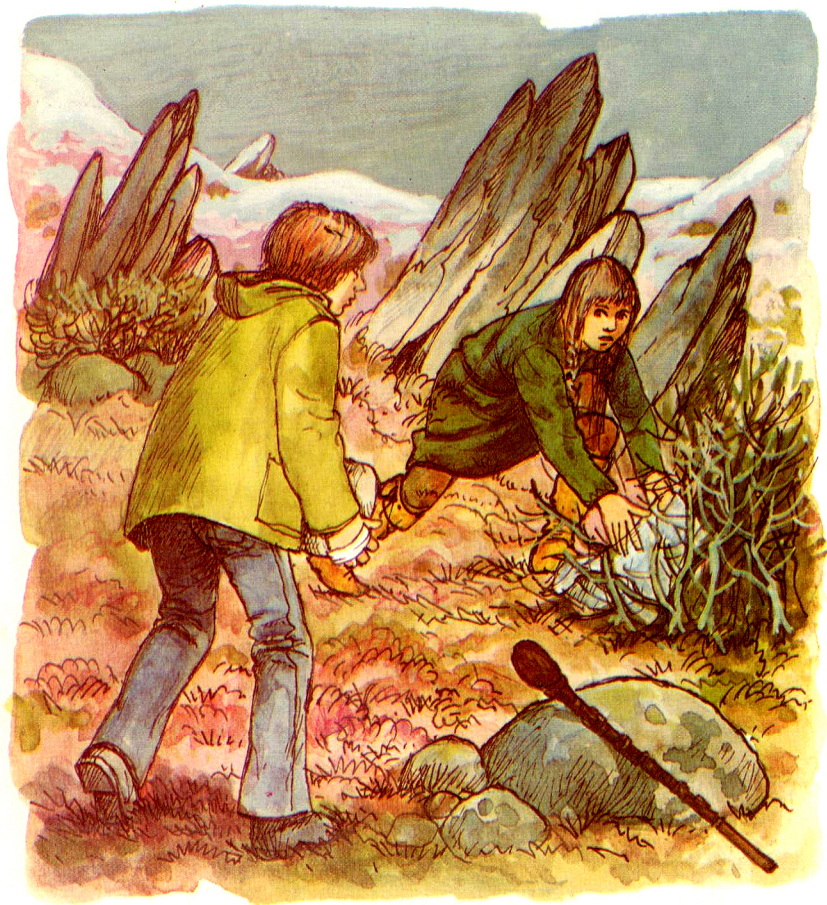
From time to time, Morag called softly to him, "Make for that hill, Sebastian," or "Follow that stream". And Sebastian turned the broomstick to the left or right, and flew along the way, as Morag said. Morag knew the way to the Hill of the Stone Prisons. Tim and Sebastian both knew that they couldn't find it without her help.

"There's no sign of the wind witches," said Tim, looking up into the sky. "Do you think we shall get there before it gets light?"

"I think so," said Morag. "We're flying very fast for a broomstick, and we haven't far to go. Look! We're coming to an end of the snow!"

The ground around them was beginning to show dark patches of heather and bushes. Ahead of them, the moors looked darker still, and the jagged stones were free of snow.

"Let's drop the blanket," said Tim. "Then we shan't show up against the dark moorland."



“We must stop and hide it,” said Morag. “If the witches saw it they would know strangers were about. They might guess who we were. No other strangers would come this way.”

Sebastian brought the broomstick down in a little valley. Tim and Morag slipped off it for a few moments. They made the blanket up into a bundle, and pushed it down into the bushes. They looked about, and found stones and moss. They covered the blanket with moss and stones, so that no one could see what was there.

They climbed back on to the broomstick again. Sebastian twitched his tail, and they were off, flying faster than ever towards the north.

The sky was growing brighter. They could see the wild country stretching away from them, in the grey light of dawn.

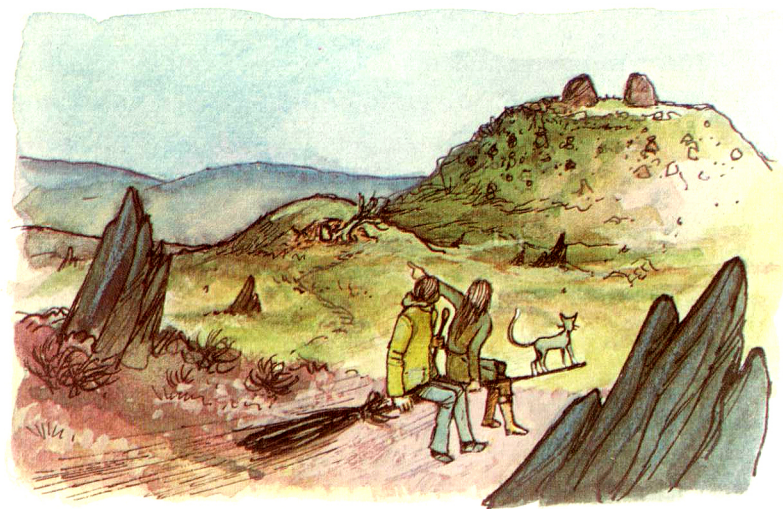
There was still no sign of the wind witches.

“The witches won’t expect us today,” said Morag. “It will take the others at least two days to get here, walking across the moor. The witches must be out, calling the stone men together, to defend the hill. We can hide today, and then, tonight, you can fly to the stone prisons.”

“I hope the witches don’t defend the hill themselves,” said Tim. “They can see me, even if the stone men can’t.”

“Perhaps they’ll go looking for you across the moor,” said Morag. “They can’t be everywhere at once, and they daren’t go too close to Grandfather Strome. They may not know that you’ve left the others.”

Tim looked northward. In the distance, he could see a hill rising up ahead of them.



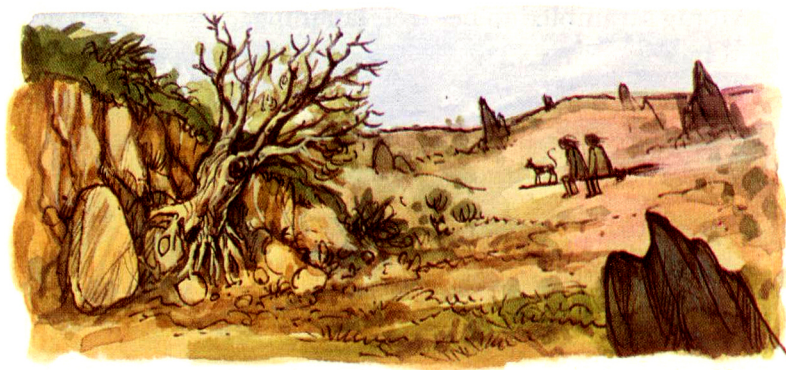
There was something about the hill which made Tim think he had seen it before.

Then he remembered. He had seen the hill when he looked into the mirror, in Melinda's cottage.

"It's there," whispered Morag. "That's the hill – the Hill of the Stone Prisons."

Tim nodded. "I know," he said. "I saw it in a mirror. Melinda showed it to me."

"Fly low, Sebastian," Morag said softly. "Keep as low as you can. Do you see that little hill, over to the left? It's more like a big mound than a hill. Take us over there. But keep down. Look! There's an old track, here in the heather. Follow the track to the little hill."



Morag was right. There was an old track across the heather, leading towards the mound. It was stony and bare in places, and in other places it was overgrown, as if it hadn't been used for a long time.

Sebastian followed the track, flying so low that their feet almost touched the ground.

The sky in the east was growing lighter. The great stones on the Hill of the Stone Prisons stood out against the sky.

They swept along to the little hill. The track ended at a little cliff, where the hillside seemed to have been cut away. There was an old tree growing beside a large, flat stone, in the side of the cliff.

"We're here, Sebastian," Morag said softly. "Drop down here, into the heather."

Sebastian jumped off the broomstick on to a patch of grass, and the broomstick dropped so suddenly that Tim and Morag tumbled off.

Morag scrambled to her feet, laughing.

"I didn't mean you to stop flying just like that!" she said.

"Rrrrr!" answered Sebastian.

Tim picked himself up and looked round. He could see that Sebastian was pleased with himself.

Tim looked across the moor.

High up in the sky, a long way away, he saw a dark shape flying towards the hill.

"Quick, Morag! A wind witch!" he cried.

Morag looked up.

"We're just in time," she said. "We can hide here, Tim. This is one of the hollow hills, which belong to the moor people. Look! I'll show you."





She turned towards the cliff.

“Stone door by the old tree,” she cried.

“Stone door by the old tree,

Open now, stone door!

I am Morag of the moor.

Open, door, for me!”

As she spoke, the great stone by the old tree moved sideways. There was a dark opening behind it, leading into the hill.

“Quickly!” cried Morag. “Come inside, Tim, before the witch can see us. You, too, Sebastian – and bring the broomstick with you.”



Tim slipped into the opening. Sebastian jumped on to the broomstick, and flew in after him. Morag followed. She turned back to the door.

“Stone door by the old tree,
Close now, stone door!
I am Morag of the moor,
Close, door, after me!”

The great stone door slid back across the opening, and they stood there in the darkness of the hill.

“Stand still for a moment,” said Morag. “The lanterns are still here. We shall soon have a light.”

Tim stood still, waiting. He heard Morag strike a stone against something hard. A moment or two later, she was standing there at his side, with a lantern in her hand.

“Take this one, Tim. I’ll take another,” she said, handing the lantern to him.

Tim took the lantern, and held it up.

They were standing in a long, stone passage. Just ahead of them there was a flight of stone steps.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“The moor people used to live here, until the stone men came,” said Morag. “We live in hollow hills – and this is one of them. The steps lead up to a little room. There’s a window there. We can spend the day there, watching the Hill of the Stone Prisons. Then you can set out, as soon as it’s too dark for the witches to see you. It’s this way. Follow me.”

Morag led the way along the passage, and up some steps. There were openings off the steps at different levels, but Morag took no notice of them. She climbed straight up, until the steps ended in a little room.

There was a hole in the far wall, looking out over the moor. Tim went quickly across to it.

It was getting light outside. He saw the Hill of the Stone Prisons across the moor, not far away. As he looked, a witch flew over the hill, and dropped down among the stones.

“Sit down and rest here, Tim,” said Morag behind him. “Have you any food left?”

Tim turned round. Morag was pulling some old sacks of bracken into the room. She set them down near the window.

Tim felt in his pockets, and pulled out some bread and cheese. He handed half of it to Morag, and gave a small piece to Sebastian.

“Wouldn’t it be better to go in the daylight?” he said. “The witches can’t fly in the sunshine.”

“No, but they can call up a storm whenever they want to,” said Morag. “You’ll see – there will be dark clouds over the sky today.”

They sat down on the sacks of bracken, munching the bread and cheese, and waited for the long day to pass.

* * * * *

The day passed slowly. Tim tried to rest, but he found it hard to sleep. He kept thinking about the others, and wondering if they were safe.

Tim looked at the back of the shield stone, and read the words of the spell again and again, until he was sure that he knew them by heart.

At last the light faded from the sky. The clouds blew away. The stars came out and the moon came up over the hill. It was time for Tim to go.

Tim and Morag and Sebastian ate the last of Pen’s bread and cheese, and went down to the stone door. Tim gripped Digory’s club in his right hand.

Morag chanted the spell again, the stone door opened, and they went outside. Sebastian rode the broomstick through the door. He held the broomstick still, a metre above the ground, waiting.



“I shall send Fiona back first on the broomstick, and then Gareth,” Tim said.

Morag shook her head. “Send them both together, Tim,” she whispered. “They will be so thin and light, after more than a year in the stone prisons, that one broomstick will carry them both. And come back as quickly as you can yourself, Tim. I wish I could come too – but I can’t help you any more, now. I shall be waiting for you.”

“Don’t worry,” whispered Tim. “I’ll be back.”

He settled himself on to the broomstick. Sebastian waved his tail, and they flew off towards the great stone prisons on the far hill.



Sebastian was flying low over the heather, but as they came towards the hill, he took the broomstick higher.

Tim looked down. He gripped the broomstick with his left hand, while his right hand tightened around Digory's club.

There were stone men below them!

He could see them all around the foot of the hill, with their stone heads and stone arms, standing looking out over the moor. Each man held a stone club in his hand, and as the broomstick swept over them, he could see their eyes.

Tim swallowed hard. His mouth was dry. He was thankful that the stone men couldn't see him.

There was a rough pathway up the hill, and all along it the stone men were standing on guard.

As they came to the great stone prisons on the top of the hill, Tim saw that the stone men were there, too. There were fewer of them by the prisons. Most of them were guarding the path. But there were enough men to be dangerous. They might not be able to see *him*, but they would club Gareth and Fiona down as soon as they were free.

“Take me to that open space, Sebastian,” he whispered. “Look – over there.”

There was a wide patch of grass on the edge of the flat top of the hill, two hundred metres or more from the stone prisons. There were no stone men over there.

Sebastian took the broomstick over to it.

“Hold the broomstick ready, Sebastian,” whispered Tim. “I’m going to get off, and take off the shield stone. But keep near me.”

Sebastian held the broomstick still a metre above the ground. His eyes were shining with excitement. Tim got off. He slipped the silver chain over his head, and set the shield stone on the grass at his feet.

“Stone men!” he shouted as loudly as he could. “Listen to me, stone men! Let Gareth and Fiona go!”

There was a sound as though a cliff was falling, as the stone men turned towards him, and saw him standing there. Tim’s ears were deafened by the sound. He saw their eyes glowing in their stone heads.



The stone men swung their heavy stone legs across the ground, as they moved towards him. Tim was thankful to see that they moved slowly.

He waited until the stone men were almost upon him. Then he bent down, and picked up the shield stone and slipped it back over his head.

“Now, Sebastian!” he cried, jumping on to the broomstick. “Make for the stone prisons!”



Sebastian twitched his tail, and the broomstick flew up, over the heads of the stone men, towards the great stone prisons on the far side of the hilltop. There were no stone men near them now.

The broomstick hovered above the first great stone.

Tim pulled the flask of silver water off his belt. He pulled off the cap, and poured some of the water on to the stone below him.

“Eyes that were shut by the cold stone,
Look out of the stone, and see!” he cried.
“Life that was hidden,
Flesh and bone,
Break out of the cold stone!
Break the spell and be free!”

The great stone below them split in pieces, with a crash.

Tim looked down. He could see a white figure in the darkness below him, among the broken pieces of stone.

“The next one, Sebastian!” he cried, and Sebastian swept the broomstick across to the second stone prison, and held it there, hovering in the air.

Again, Tim poured out the silver water, and again he shouted the spell:

“Eyes that were shut by the cold stone,
Look out of the stone, and see!
Life that was hidden,
Flesh and bone,
Break out of the cold stone!
Break the spell and be free!”

And again the great stone below him split in half, and a white figure stood up out of the broken pieces.

Tim glanced across at the stone men. They were swinging towards them across the hilltop. Their eyes were shining with fury.

“Drop down, Sebastian! Quick!” cried Tim.

Sebastian took the broomstick to within a metre of the grass, and held it there.

Tim slipped off, and turned to the two white figures. They had found each other, and Gareth was holding Fiona in his arms. She seemed very weak. She was only just able to stand.



“Quick!” Tim cried. “Get on the broomstick! Sebastian will take you to the hill. You can hide there till Grandfather Strome comes. Quick!”

“But —” began Gareth.

“There’s no time to tell you anything,” cried Tim. “Quick! The stone men will be here in a moment.”

Gareth said no more. He helped Fiona to sit on the broomstick, and sat down beside her, holding her firmly. Sebastian twitched his tail, and the broomstick flew up, and over the heads of the advancing stone men.

They were just in time.

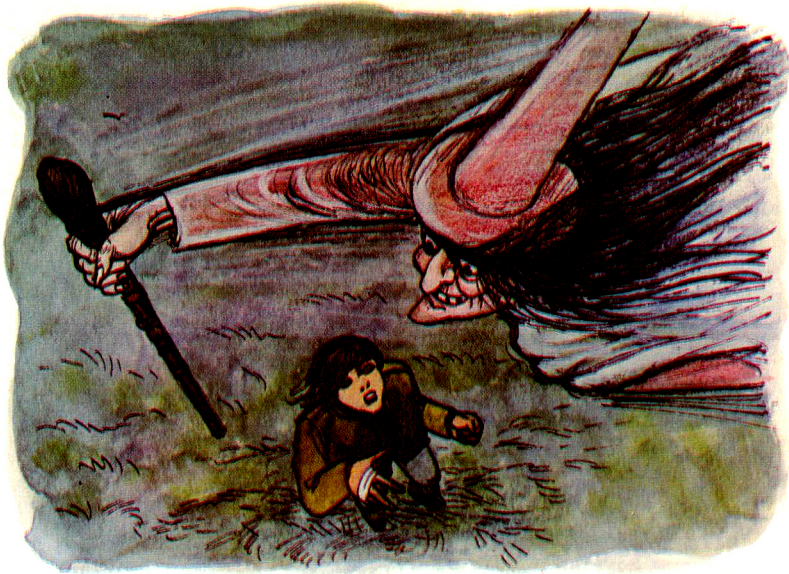


The stone men stopped, staring up into the sky after the broomstick. One of them flung his stone club towards it, but he missed, and the stone fell with a thud on to the grass.

Tim looked around him quickly. The stone men were on every side of him, but he could still slip through them. He ran quickly through a gap between them, and across to the path down the hill.

But as soon as he reached the path, he knew that he couldn't go that way. The path was blocked by stone men, and even if they couldn't see him, they could hear him and he couldn't climb over them.

He turned to the side, and began to scramble down the hill, through the clumps of gorse and heather.

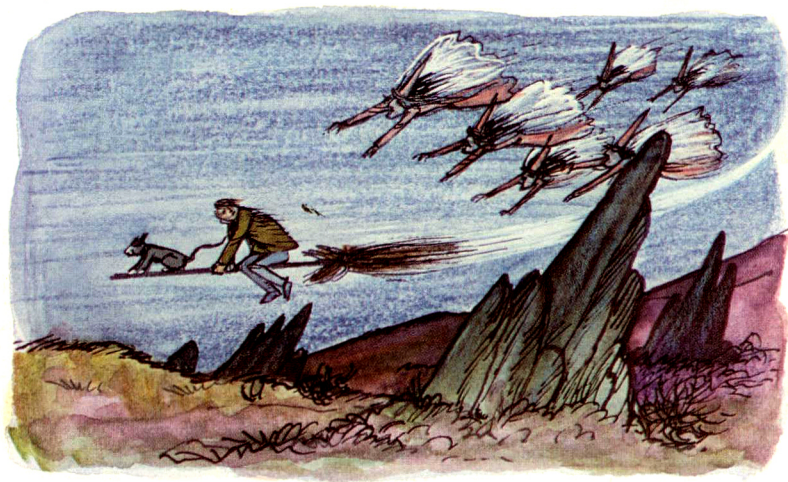


He had nearly reached the foot of the hill, when he heard a whistle in the air above his head. He looked up quickly, and saw the wind witches sweep in low over the hilltop.

There was a cry of triumph from one of the witches. They had seen him! One after another, they dived down out of the sky towards him. Tim waved Digory's club at them. As each witch reached him, she swept up into the air again. As the last witch swept down, she seized Digory's club from Tim's hand, and carried it off into the air with her.

She shouted again in triumph.

The other witches whistled in reply, as they whirled over his head.



Then Tim saw what the witches were doing. They were showing the stone men where he was. From every side of the hill, stone men were moving towards him. There was a ring of stone men all around him – and now that he hadn't got the club he couldn't get through.

There was a sudden little “Rrrr!” at his side, the broomstick fell at his feet, and Sebastian jumped off.

“Sebastian!” cried Tim. “Sebastian, you shouldn't have come back! The wind witches will get you!”

“Rrrrrrr!” cried Sebastian. He twitched his tail, and the broomstick lifted off the ground. He jumped on to it.

Tim climbed on behind him. Sebastian twitched his tail wildly, and they flew off, low down over the heather, as the witches dived down towards them.



Sebastian lifted the broomstick up, and over the stone men, and sent it flying fast towards the mound where Morag was waiting.

The wind witches dived down out of the sky towards them. They were stretching out their hands towards Sebastian, to pull him from the broomstick.

“Drop down! Down to the ground, Sebastian! It’s our only chance!” shouted Tim.

Sebastian dropped the broomstick down to the heather. Tim jumped off, seized Sebastian, opened his anorak, and zipped it up with Sebastian inside.

He was not a second too soon. The wind witches swept down out of the sky, and landed on the heather in front of him.

Their eyes were burning like fires.



A figure stepped out of the darkness ahead of them.

“Up, you witches!” cried a deep voice. “Up and away! My magic is stronger than yours. Away with you, back to your cave, and leave us in peace! Away with you, I say!”

It was Grandfather Strome.

The wind witches whirled up into the air above them. Tim heard them whistling and crying wildly to each other as they went. They swept back, over the Hill of the Stone Prisons, and were gone.

Tim sat down on a big stone. His knees were shaking. Sebastian pushed his head under Tim's chin.

"Rrrrr?" he said.

Tim hugged him. "Sebastian," he said. "Sebastian, you're the best cat in the whole world!"

"Tim!" cried Grandfather Strome. "Tim!"

"I'm all right," said Tim, getting up. "I just felt a bit shaky, but I'm all right. How did you get here? And where are the others?"

"The others are in the moor people's hill," said Grandfather Strome. "We walked all day and all night to get here, and Arun is very tired. Gareth and Fiona are with them. We are all together, and Pen has come, too. She found one of the night-mares and persuaded the horse to fly north to join us. Come, let me help you."

He picked up the broomstick in one hand, and put the other arm around Tim's shoulder. "I should have remembered that cat. Alan guessed he had taken you to the hill. But no one could have guessed that he would go back to save you. I have never known a cat risk being caught by the wind witches before."

"There isn't another cat like Sebastian," said Tim.

They made their way slowly up to the mound. The stone door was open. Gareth and Fiona stood there with the others, waiting for them.

* * * * *



They feasted that night in the little hill. Arun and Tim just managed to stay awake long enough to eat with them, and then they went up the stairs to the little room, and curled up on the sacks of bracken, and slept. They didn't even stir, when Pen brought warm blankets up, and tucked them round them. But Sebastian woke. He was sleeping by Tim's feet, but he was still on guard. He saw Pen, purred, and went to sleep again.

They slept all through the day until the evening, and they only woke then because Alan Tremaine came up to the little room, and shook them awake.

"It's getting dark," Alan said. "It's nearly time to go. There's some hot soup waiting for you, and bread and honey that Pen brought with her. Come down and eat it, and then we must all be going."



The boys stumbled down the stone stairs, still half asleep, to the room lower down in the hill, where they had feasted the night before.

Everyone was waiting for them. They drank hot soup, and felt better.

“What happens now, Alan?” asked Tim.

“The moor people are coming,” said Alan. “They will be here soon, and I shall go back with them.

“Grandfather Strome and Pen, and Gareth and Fiona, will all go back to Pen’s cottage, where the boat is waiting. You and Arun can ride the night-mare home, back to your camping things in the wood. We have sent a message to Stareth. She will be waiting for you. You have both done enough. Gareth and Fiona will be safe enough now. We shall all be with them, until they reach their home on Grandfather Strome’s island.”

Gareth and Fiona came forward. They looked white and thin, but already they were growing stronger.

“We shall never forget you, Tim, or you, Arun,” said Gareth. “We shall never forget that, but for you, we should have lived and died in the stone prisons.”

“You must come and see us, both of you,” said Fiona putting out her hands. “You must come.”

“If you come to Pen’s home on the shore, I’ll come in my boat and fetch you,” said Grandfather Strome. “We shall all be waiting for you – and Nicola and Jeremy, too. And Morag. Morag shall come and see you there.”

“You will, won’t you, Morag?” said Tim. “I’d never have broken the stone prisons without your help.”

“I’ll be there, Tim,” said Morag.

“It’s time to go,” said Alan Tremaine. “The night-mare is waiting in the cave on the far side of the hill.”

They went outside. Pen set off to the cave to fetch the night-mare, who had spent the day hidden in the darkness.

She was soon back. Tim climbed up on the great mare’s back, and picked up her silver bridle. Arun climbed up behind him. Sebastian ran up on to a rock, and took a flying leap, landing on the mare in front of Tim.

“Give the silver bridle to Stareth, and let the mare go, when you get to the wood,” cried Alan Tremaine. “Good-bye, Tim! Goodbye, Arun. All our thanks go with you. We shall see you again before long.”



“Goodbye!” cried the others. “Goodbye, Tim! Goodbye, Arun! Goodbye, Sebastian, bravest of cats! Our thanks go with you!”

“Goodbye,” cried the boys.

The night-mare took three quick paces along the ground, and took off into the night sky.



They flew up high over the moor.

Tim looked down. He could still see the figures standing by the hill, far below them. Then, as the great horse flew swiftly southward, they were out of sight behind the hills.

"We'll go to the island one day, Tim," said Arun. "Are you very tired?"

"Not very," said Tim. "But we'll sleep today, as soon as we can find a campsite."

Arun laughed. "A campsite!" he said. "That does sound queer! Does ordinary life always seem so strange, after you've been with the Hidden People?"

"Yes, it does," said Tim. "But it won't be so bad now. There are three of us now – you and me and Sebastian."

"Rrrrrr!" said Sebastian.



The great horse flew southward through the night, and set them down among the walls of the house in the wood an hour before the dawn.

Stareth was waiting for them.

Tim took off the silver bridle, and gave it to her. The night-mare flew away under the stars.

Their bicycles and their camping things were all there, ready for them, and Stareth helped them to take everything safely to the road, while they told her how Gareth and Fiona had been set free.

Then they said goodbye to Stareth, and pedalled away down the road, just as the dawn was breaking.

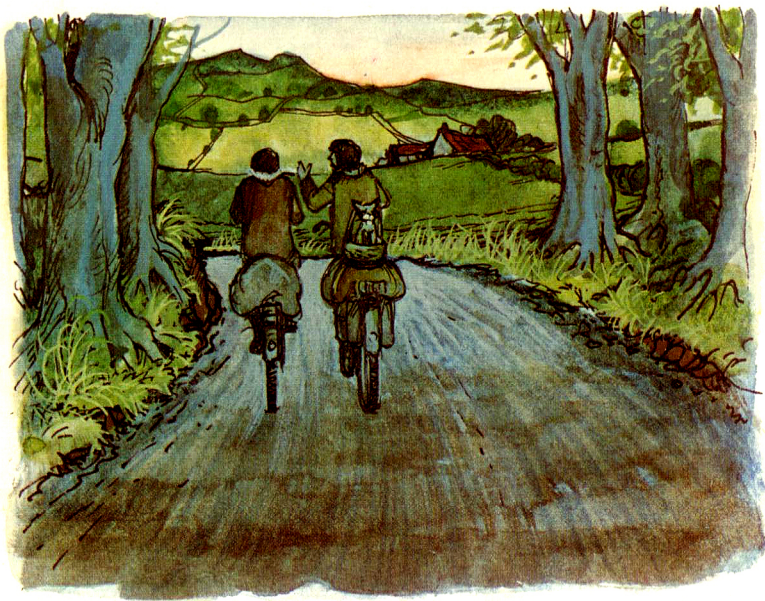
“What shall we do now?” asked Tim.

“Go back to that farmhouse, and camp in the orchard,” said Arun. “It’s the nearest place – and we needn’t worry about the Hidden People any more. We’re off on a camping holiday, Tim. Remember? We’re off on holiday, and there’s nothing to worry about any more!”

“Rrrrrr!” said Sebastian.

Tim laughed. “The holiday starts today!” he said.

They pedalled happily down the road.



FLIGHTPATH TO READING

A Series

1. Tim and Tobias
2. All the Fun of the Fair
3. Tim Meets Captain Jory
4. Tim and the Smugglers
5. Tim and the Witches
6. The Highwayman
7. Magic in The Yard
8. The Key

B Series

1. The Return of The Key
2. Captain Jory Lends a Hand
3. The Stump People
4. Watchers in The Yard
5. Red for Danger
6. At the House of the Safe Witch
7. Tim in Hiding
8. On the Night of the Full Moon

C Series

1. The Pool by the Whispering Trees
2. Tim in Trouble
3. On the Road to the North
4. Riding into Danger
5. Mandrake's Castle
6. Escape by Night
7. Three Fires on the Dark Tower
8. Tim Rides on the Ghost Bus

D Series

1. News from the North
2. The Cry in the Dark
3. The Shield Stone
4. The Storm over the Sea
5. The Cave of the Wind Witches
6. In Diaman's Cave
7. Danger on the Moor
8. At the Hill of the Stone Prisons

Flightpath to Reading D8

